

Resolution: SA R31: Mandating Content Warnings for Traumatic Content in the Classroom

Date	04/03/2023
Action	Rejected by the President
Notes	<p>Thank you for conveying Student Assembly Resolution #31, “Mandating Content Warnings for Traumatic Content in the Classroom.” We cannot accept this resolution, as the actions it recommends would infringe on our core commitment to academic freedom and freedom of inquiry, and are at odds with the goals of a Cornell education.</p> <p>Academic freedom, which is a fundamental principle in higher education, establishes the right of faculty members to determine what they teach in their classrooms and how they teach it, provided that they behave in a manner consistent with professional ethics and competence, and do not introduce controversial matters unrelated to the subject of their course. And freedom of inquiry establishes the right of students, researchers, and scholars to select a course of study and research without censure or undue interference.</p> <p>Common courtesy would suggest that in some cases faculty may wish to provide notice, whether via the course syllabus or in the classroom, when they will be addressing topics that some may find challenging or painful. Similarly, it may also sometimes be appropriate for faculty to contextualize such topics, and explain why they are being introduced. But requiring that faculty anticipate and warn about all such situations—described in the resolution as content “including but not limited to: sexual assault, domestic violence, self-harm, suicide, child abuse, racial hate crimes, transphobic violence, homophobic harassment, xenophobia”—would unacceptably restrict the academic freedom of our community, interfering in significant ways with Cornell’s mission and its core value of Free and Purposeful Inquiry and Expression.</p> <p>Such a policy would violate our faculty’s fundamental right to determine what and how to teach, preventing them from adding, throughout the semester, any content that any student might find upsetting. It would have a chilling effect on faculty, who would naturally fear censure lest they bring a discussion spontaneously into new and challenging territory, or fail to accurately anticipate students’ reaction to a topic or idea. And it would unacceptably limit our students’ ability to speak, question, and explore, lest a classroom conversation veer into an area determined “off-limits” unless warned against weeks or months earlier.</p> <p>Moreover, we cannot require that “students who chose to opt-out of exposure to triggering content will not be penalized, contingent on their responsibility to make up any missed content.” Learning to engage with difficult and challenging ideas is a core part of a university education: essential to our students’ intellectual growth, and to their future ability to lead and thrive in a diverse society. As such, permitting our students to opt out of all such encounters, across any course or topic, would have a deleterious impact both on the education of the individual student, and on the academic distinction of a Cornell degree.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Martha E. Pollack, President</p> <p>Michael I. Kotlikoff, Provost</p>